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PROGRAM The Today Show

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JANE PAULEY: As NBC News first reported in Marvin Kalb documentary earlier this year, Italian officials say the Bulgarian government was involved in a plot to kill the Pope. This morning, in a rare move, the Bulgarian government held a news conference to tell its side of the story.

NBC News correspondent Keith Miller is with us now live in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Keith, good morning.

Did the Bulgarians refute the evidence or did they merely deny it?

KEITH MILLER: I would say that they denied it. Certainly, they wanted to refute it. They brought out two members of the Bulgarian Embassy staff that were in Rome at the time of the shooting. We think that they weren't involved in the case. These two men are being sought by the Italian judiciary officials.

The thing is, they did not have specifics. They were very upset at the world's press, at the kind of coverage they've gotten. Certainly, any time Bulgaria or any country is implicated in trying to take the life of the Pope, it's going to cause great problems. They're under tremendous pressure to try to clear up the case. But I think they're having difficulty at this point.

PAULEY: Keith, do the Italian officials have specifics in their charges against these two Bulgarian officials?

MILLER: Well, they have the charges against the two that are now in Bulgaria which they would certainly like to have these men taken back to Italy. But there is a Bulgarian now in custody for complicity in the attack on the Pope. He went before a court which decided that there was enough evidence to hold him. So certainly, if the Italian judiciary system is saying we have the evidence then you have to assume that they're certainly telling the truth.

PAULEY: How much of that evidence is public? What do you know?

MILLER: Well, we know a few things, not all those things can be mentioned where we're sitting right at the moment. Certainly the most important one is the fact that Ali Agca, the man convicted of shooting the Pope, gave a sealed confession to a very important judge who has been on this case for years, indicating that he had help from three Bulgarians on the day that he shot the Pope, including transportation and the fact that the Bulgarians were going to take him out of the St. Peter's Square to help him escape.

Obviously, he didn't escape. He was arrested. He is the one who has now implicated three Bulgarians and five Turks in the entire plot to assassinate the Pope.

PAULEY: Keith, given your reading of the other western reporters who were at that extremely unusual news conference, did the Bulgarians seem to raise more questions than they answered?

MILLER: I would say they raised quite a few. I think especially the Italian journalists were quite strong on asking for specifics: that if you are denying this, then tell us why. And they got into a short shouting match at a certain point.

Also, it must be understood that two weeks ago, two Italian tourists were picked up and charged with spying. And many people believe that was in retaliation for the accusations against the Bulgarians.

PAULEY: Keith, thank you; from Sofia, Bulgaria.